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NAVY MEDICINE IN FOCUS

Navy Nurse Earns Highest Possible Award

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Navy Lt. Cmdr. Lynn Redman focused on helping women and children during her deployment to Afghanistan. (Photo by Army Capt. Peter Shinn)

Lt. Cmdr. Deborah “Lynn” Redman’s deployment to Afghanistan landed her in prison. Not as an inmate – but as a reserve Navy nurse. On her arrival in the war-ravaged country, she realized a strong desire to help Afghan women and children through outreach missions, first from Forward Operating Base (FOB) Farah, near Iran, and then later from FOB Wright in the Kunar province to which she was assigned.

At first her requests were denied. But after successive appeals, Redman was allowed to work with a Special Forces team training the Afghan Army. Together with a Provincial Reconstruction Team, she embarked on missions outside the wire.

That persistence, coupled with her life-saving work, helped her earn unprecedented international recognition – the Red Cross’ Florence Nightingale Medal, the highest award a nurse may receive.



Most of Afghanistan is very rugged and Redman and her team had to walk and climb steep mountainside to arrive at their destinations. (photo by Army Capt. Peter Shinn)

Redman drills with the Navy Reserves at the Navy Operational Support Center on Joint Base San Antonio-Fort Sam Houston, and she is employed as a civilian nurse in Cardiology at the Brooke Army Medical Center. She is the first Navy nurse to receive the Florence Nightingale Medal and one of only five Americans named among 32 recipients from 16 countries selected by the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva, Switzerland, in 2013.

Only 1,408 nurses have received the medal since its inception in 1912. The award recognizes nurses who have distinguished themselves through exceptional courage and devotion to victims of armed conflict or natural disasters during war or peacetime, or for exceptional nursing service in the areas of public health or nursing education.



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Redman's first mission took her to an Afghan prison in Farah and brought her into contact with 500 men, several women, and an 8-month-old little girl who had a 102-degree fever. She also encountered an Afghan woman dressed in men's clothes who identified herself as half woman, half man. She was arrested for transporting drugs, but the woman told Redman she had come to the prison to "turn in" drugs she took from her family.

Redman was able to complete gynecological exams on the women and gave the sick baby antibiotics. Although she felt that first mission was quite successful, she was concerned with being unable to treat the rampant high blood pressure she found among nearly every Afghan she examined at the prison.

"And I will never know the outcome of the sick baby," Redman lamented, but she found courage among all of her patients.

Redman particularly admired the fortitude of the woman who dressed in male clothing.

"She wanted to help others," Redman said. "By cutting her hair short and wearing men's clothes, she was able to go places and do things she otherwise would not be able to accomplish."



A view of one of the villages in Afghanistan Redman visited to help the women and children who live there. (Photo by Army Capt. Peter Shinn)

Among other missions, the Navy nurse was able to instruct a team of Afghan soldiers on triage in the field, allowing an IV to be started on her by one of the soldiers. A partnership between the Kunar PRT and the Iowa National Guard's 734th Agribusiness Development Team gave her the opportunity to educate Afghan health professionals on effective rabies control, during a conference at the Asadabad Hospital, where she visited with ill and injured Afghan patients.



Redman poses with several Afghan boys from the village she was visiting. (courtesy photo)

A previous visit to the Asadabad Hospital with her team resulted in a re-engagement of communications between American and Afghan surgeons.

Her work inside the wire at FOB Wright was not without challenges. A group of 17 American service members and local nationals arrived at the base aid station with injuries sustained during a firefight with Taliban insurgents. At one point when the doctors took the most serious patient into surgery, she triaged a patient who had a bullet near an aorta, while looking after the rest of the 15 patients.

"That was scary," Redman said. "I was responsible for caring for so many people with serious injuries."

Afghanistan was only one of several deployments. As an active duty Air Force nurse in Balad, Iraq, Redman held 22-year-old Army Sgt. Kurtis Arcala's hand and stroked his hair, comforting him as he died from untreatable wounds received from a roadside bomb while he was on patrol.

Her humanitarian efforts include traveling to Guyana, South America, where she cared for more than 2,000 people. Redman was also stationed in West Germany while working as a soldier coordinator for the American Red Cross in the late 1980s.

Although the Florence Nightingale Medal marks a milestone in Redman's career, she says her journey was rocky and fraught with obstacles.

"As a single mom with three kids, I was at a crossroads early in life. I thought about teaching while I was working as a seamstress on food stamps. I knew poverty," Redman recalled.

Redman said she chose nursing because she saw a lot of job opportunities in the want ads. She applied and was accepted into a nursing program but did not have the tuition. Her counselor suggested loans. Through perseverance Redman completed her education and then fulfilled a dream – she fell in love with nursing. She said she adores her patients and the relationships she has with them.

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Redman still encounters difficulties in her life, but sees each as a chance for growth. She did not complete anesthesia training, for instance, but that gave her the opportunity to deploy to Afghanistan. “Failure is an opportunity,” Redman emphasized. “If you don’t like your life then change it. Only in America can an unwed mom find success. It’s a choice.”

Writing children’s books that educate them about illness and disease is Redman’s next dream.

“Children are amazing. They will be sick and vomit one minute and then be ready to play the next. They don’t know how to be victims yet.”



About vjohnson